

AN HUMBLE HERO

BY THOMAS P. MONTFORT

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CHAPTER XVII.

A MATTER OF INTEREST.

Never since that day on which the battle of Lexington was fought had there been such intense excitement on Possum Ridge. The people, forgetting their everyday duties, collected in little groups and all day long talked in low, hushed tones of the terrible thing that had happened. A thousand questions were asked, many of them of a most frivolous nature, but propounded in all seriousness; a thousand surmises were made, and those who happened to possess a knowledge of information relative to the one subject of absorbing interest repeated their information over and over again for the delectation of their less fortunate fellow-mortals.

"At a little quiet place like Beckett's Mill where few new things out of the common ever transpire, a murder is an event of supreme importance, it is sufficient to claim the entire and undivided attention of the people for a day and to remain the chief topic of conversation for a week or even a month. It is an event which marks an epoch and from which time is reckoned."

"Lying in state in a little waterroom just off Hicks' store was all that remained of James Melvin. Jim Thorn in passing through Sim Banks' wood had found the body lying across a little footpath, in almost the same spot where Melvin and Louisa had met. Thorn, in a mild state of excitement, had appeared at Hicks' store to report his find. Hicks and others had repaired to the scene and had removed the body to town.

Soon the news spread, and in an incredibly short time everybody at Beckett's Mill knew of the tragedy. Then the people came to see and to ask questions. Of course every one, man, woman and child, had to pass through the little waterroom and look on the lifeless form. Then, having looked, they gathered in little knots to talk all over.

Jim Thorn, having been the forerunner to make the find, occupied the pedestal of chief importance in the village that day. Wherever he went, whichever way he turned, there was an eager group about him, listening anxiously for every word that fell from his lips. Time and again, and always to interested listeners, he repeated the story of the find down to the minutest details. And the story Jim Thorn told was this:

"When I got up this morning, I says to my woman, says I, 'Lucinda, I guess I'll just step over to Joe Beckett's pasture and look at that cut of Joe's. Joe, he's been on a trade; for a right smart while, an he's been a-wanting me to take a calf he's got, ever-ther."

"Well, I put on my hat and went over to Joe's, but Joe's woman told me Joe wasn't at home, but that he'd gone out to look for a pig that strayed away. So I just went in, looked at the salt-meat up my mind, Joe wanted too much for it. Then started back across the woods for home. Well, I walked a right smart piece, was a-goin along with my head bowed down, a-thinkin bout somethin' when all at once I kind glanced up, an right before me, six feet away, laid that dead man."

"Lord, but I bet you jumped in hole!" some one exclaimed.

Thorn gave the speaker a look of mingled contempt and admiration.

"I bet I never," he replied. "I never moved an inch, nor I never gave a spoken word to him. I just stood there."

"Well, you was scared, any how."

"I was, I was scaredy, not many a minute now, but I am this minute."

"Did you hear him?" someone asked.

"He's a son-of-a-bitch," said one.

"There was a short pause, after which some one said impressively:

"Lord, just to think of a fellow walking up to a dead man like that! My land, I wouldn't do such a thing."

"Next didn't he bring him in?"

"I knowed he would, but I bet he thought it might be ag'in the law, so I wasn't figure on gun into no trouble now."

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